

Jörg FEUCHTER, Friedhelm HOFFMANN, Bee YUN (eds.). *Cultural Transfers in Dispute: Representations in Asia, Europe and the Arab World since the Middle Ages*. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag, 2011. 335 pages. ISBN 978-3-593-39404-6 (Paper). 49.00 USD.

The concept of cultural transfers (*transferts culturels* in French) has been developed in a Franco-German context since the mid-1980s. It was not only formulated against classical nation-centred narratives, but also against the limitations of comparative history. The idea was to show that every culture has incorporated elements of foreign cultures. Cultural transfers are always a response to a specific situation in which a deficit had been realised. Transfer studies emphasise the role of the historical actors and the transfer vehicles. The results of these transfers are not seen as mere copies of minor value. On the contrary, transferring foreign elements to another context is a genuinely active and creative procedure and the outcomes are of equal value. Transfer studies underline the agency of the actors in the receiving context, in strong opposition to older diffusionist models that took only the departure context seriously. Cultural transfers are therefore processes where historical actors actively imported foreign cultural elements to their own country. The concept has become one of the central tools of transnational history.¹

It cannot be denied that Korea as well has been intimately connected to developments occurring outside the peninsula, at least since the opening of the country during the 1870s. From this time onwards, Korea joined the logic of the transnational circulation of knowledge and ideas on a scale without precedence. This change involved, to a great extent, the application of foreign knowledge and cultural elements in Korea. These elements came to Korea in two ways, with the question of agency clearly differentiating them from each other. Firstly, Koreans themselves made efforts to adapt to the new circumstances, importing knowledge they regarded as essential for Korea's future development. Secondly, foreign actors tried to influence or put pressure on Korea and transform the peninsula according to their own agendas, which corresponds to imperialist inroads into Korea. Moreover, the question is a crucial one for politicized and often polemical national discourses. In a nationalist understanding, indigenous traditions are often more precious and are a greater source of pride than imports.

That is where this volume comes in. It is the outcome of a conference held at Berlin's Humboldt University in 2009. As one of the editors explains in the introduction, the book takes as its subject representations of transfers, that is how certain groups, competing with one another, refer to transfers, sometimes even denying or inventing them, thereby constituting part of the struggle over the construction of cultural identities. Hartmut Kaelble of Humboldt University, an eminent specialist of European social history and a close observer of the debate on cultural transfers, contributes a foreword. Among other things he points to some weaknesses of the transfer concept, the overcoming of which will help to

further develop this approach. The concept was first applied in the Franco-German context, that is for two relatively similar societies. But relations between different societies are not always equal and often are characterised by power asymmetries. One could turn the issue into the question: How can the transfer concept be further developed taking into account East Asian specificities? Kaelble also suggests analysing “chains of transfers” that involved several countries.

This volume brings together studies mostly from Europe and the Arab World, but is of particular importance for the Korean context because one of its co-editors, Bee Yun, is Korean and two chapters empirically discuss Korean cases, testifying to the dynamics of transnational research on Korean history.³ As we will see, the two chapters on Korea do not directly fit into the framework outlined by the editors. This, however, does not diminish their intrinsic value.

Ha Young-Sun, professor at the Department of International Relations of Seoul National University, uses the approach of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte* in German) and calls for an East-Asian history of concepts. He argues that such a history has to take into account the history of concepts in Europe, their transfer to East Asia, and the regional struggles within the East Asia context. In his chapter, Ha outlines such an approach with regard to the concept of civilization and its transfer to Korea. He underlines the central role of Fukuzawa Yukichi, who in turn had been inspired by the European philosophers François Guizot and Henry Thomas Buckle. Yu Gil-jun, a disciple of Fukuzawa during his stay in Japan, built on Fukuzawa's concepts and developed a hierarchy of countries according to their civilizational level. He placed Korea within this hierarchy and thus suggested a program for reforms in Korea that combined Korean and European elements. Yu's thinking did not become hegemonic because it encountered rejection from Confucian thinkers who opposed European concepts. These conservatives only started to appropriate the civilizational discourse when Liang Qichao had introduced the notion of civilization to China. But—as Ha argues—this was too late as Korea soon lost its independence and intellectual debates were suppressed. The chapter consistently uncovers the dynamics of acceptance and rejection between the three East Asian countries.

Choi Jungwoon, professor at the same department, analyses how European concepts of love have been transferred to Korea during the first decades of the twentieth century. He argues that Korean concepts of love diverged decisively from European ones: “Traditional Korean love pleased, but European love hurt.” Choi traces the usage of European love concepts in the novels of the writer Yi Gwangsu before his collaboration with the Japanese. The situation of colonial Korea determined Yi's appropriation of European concepts of love. They served to develop

¹ Matthias Middell, “Kulturtransfer und transnationale Geschichte” [Cultural transfers and transnational history], *Dimensionen der Kultur- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte* [Dimensions of cultural and social history] (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 49-72.

² Recently the term “multiply-translated modernity” has been suggested in Ryu Si-hyun, “Multiply-Translated Modernity in Korea: Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* and its Japanese and Korean Translation,” *International Journal of Korean History*, 16, 2, 2011, 153-80.

a new form of subjectivity and a new kind of hero to fight Japanese imperialism. Choi's argument is convincing although his understanding of European love might sometimes appear slightly oversimplified. Both chapters thus demonstrate how Koreans in a straightforward manner actively appropriated foreign knowledge and concepts in order to use them for their own projects within the Korean context. However, they do not explicitly refer to the representations of transfers, the leading theme of the book project.

All in all, the volume is a stimulating collection of studies on cultural transfers and their representations. On the one hand, it will hopefully inspire more transnational research on East Asia and especially Korea. On the other hand, one can expect that this book will make European readers familiar with Korea's entry into modernity.

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